



"In the Shepherd's Service"
Scripture – John 10:11-18
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, April 25, 2021

In his book *Love is the Way*, Bishop Michael Curry tells of the night the church roof caught fire.¹

Now the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Curry then served as the rector of St. James' in Baltimore. As he describes it, that church had a "goodly heritage." Since the early 1820's the parish had included "prominent, influential, and prosperous Black parishioners" — like the founder of the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper. The first Black female Episcopal priest grew up in the St. James' congregation, and even Thurgood Marshall had roots there, having passed through the waters of the font at St James' Episcopal Church.

When Michael Curry arrived there in 1988, the congregation hadn't changed much. Its membership was still "mostly middle – and upper-middle class folk — doctors, lawyers, educators." What had changed was Baltimore.

By the late 1980s, most of the neighborhood's more affluent residents had fled the city, seeking safety in the suburbs as rates of drug-use and violent crime exploded. "When crack cocaine hit in the 1980s it decimated normal life," Curry explains. "When I arrived, the place was a war zone. Rival gangs were fighting each other, and they were all fighting the police." At one point Curry found himself shepherding a group of Sunday-school kids past the site of a recent homicide; the children gawked as officers hastily covered the dead body with a sheet. In the summers, Curry would take these same children to the park ... but never without sending a maintenance crew ahead to clean up the needles. This was life in West Baltimore.

So when lighting struck the pinnacle of St. James' on a summer evening in 1993, it looked to some like the perfect "out." The wooden roof quickly caught fire and the church went up in flames. People gathered outside St. James', watching helplessly as the building burned. One of the neighborhood's last, enduring landmarks was being consumed before their very eyes in what the insurance paperwork would call "an act of God."

In the midst of this chaos, a reporter approached Michael Curry and posed a question: "You're going to get insurance money," he said. "Will the church leave the city?"

It wasn't a surprising question. Many congregations had already left West Baltimore and neighborhoods like it in other cities throughout the country. And most of the members of St. James' had moved away, drawn to greener

¹ The references to the work and witness of St. James' Episcopal Church in Baltimore come from the chapter "Leave No One Behind" in *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* by Bishop Michael Curry (New York: Avery, 2020).

pastures in more affluent neighborhoods. No, the reporter's question was not surprising at all. In reflection on this moment, Curry writes:

'The city' ... stood for every intractable problem in America. The city was where crime was skyrocketing. Where drugs were festering. Where schools were struggling. Leave the city and you could leave all these problems behind, for a nice house and some green grass in a good school district. Leave the city and the city became someone else's problem.

We can understand the appeal of leaving the city — of uprooting this historic congregation and transplanting it in a quieter neighborhood, in a more serene setting ... the kind of locale that looks more like the idyllic landscape described in Psalm 23: *He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.*

Of course, no community can offer perfect peace; no neighborhood is without its challenges. But a nice spot in the suburbs would have given the people of St. James' a park where Sunday-school children could run in green grass without stepping on needles.

On the other hand, staying in the city would mean tethering itself to a neighborhood that looked — at least to outside eyes — like the Valley of the Shadow of Death. And, by all accounts, West Baltimore in 1993 was a shadowed valley where the Good Shepherd's care was not readily apparent.

The same could be said now of many neighborhoods in many American cities. Thirty years after St. James' caught fire, the issues that plagued its community still plague communities across our nation: A lack of resources leads to poverty of opportunity; a lack of opportunity leads to poverty of hope. And, so, other things flourish: like the gun violence that has stopped surprising us. Like desperation. Like suspicion. What thrives is a widely held assumption that cities are dangerous and not worth the investment. So it's no surprise that we reckon time and again with tragic outcomes as people fall prey to cruelty and carelessness. It's no surprise when they fall victim to the failures of people and systems intended to shepherd public safety and ensure communal well-being. Curry's comment still holds: The city stands for every intractable problem in America. Yes, we can understand the appeal of leaving the city.

"Will the church leave the city?"

I doubt the reporter who asked this of Michael Curry was concerned with the question's theological implications. But, whether he knew it or not, he was getting at an issue far bigger than this congregation's address. He was asking something not only of the people of St. James' Episcopal Church, but of every person in the Good Shepherd's flock and fold. That reporter was asking: Who is the church called to be? Who is the church called to serve?

And, of course, the answer lies with the One who calls us each by name — Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

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"I am the good shepherd," Jesus says. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

I imagine a willingness to sacrifice oneself is not the first characteristic that comes to mind when you consider God, the Good Shepherd. If you're like me, you more readily draw from the comforting words of Psalm 23 — the Psalm that offers one of the most familiar and cherished images of the Good Shepherd in all of Scripture. God is our companion and our guide — the One who leads us in the ways of righteousness and walks beside us when we traverse life's shadowed valleys. This God sets a table before us and provides for our souls' needs. But Scripture reminds us that the role of the divine Shepherd involves more than comfort and care. According to the witness of Scripture, the shepherd who leads us beside still waters is the same one who searches the wilderness to seek out and save the lost, the same one who — ultimately — lays down his life for the sheep.

Unlike the hired hand, who abandons the sheep to save his own skin, the Good Shepherd lays down his life to ensure the welfare of the flock. The difference between the two is the difference between self-preservation and self-sacrifice; the hired hand tends the sheep for profit and forsakes them when the endeavor endangers his interests. The shepherd, on the other hand, is so invested in the well-being of the flock that he will put himself in harm's way — he will lay down his life — to save the sheep from peril. In short, the Good Shepherd gives his life so that others might live.

Of course, Jesus is not speaking merely in metaphor. We know how this story goes. The Good Shepherd does lay down his life. And he does take it up again, just as he said. Jesus is so committed to the well-being of the whole community that he does not stand down, even when the religious leaders and the Roman legion come like wolves in the night. He lays down his life so that others might have life ... and have it abundantly. And, thanks be to God, the way of love wins out. Jesus rises from the dead; he takes up his life. And — then — he seeks out his followers, and asks them to take up this life as well.

According to John, after the resurrected Christ appeared to his followers in Jerusalem, he comes to them as they are fishing on the Sea of Galilee. And, in that moment, the Good Shepherd entrusts his flock to the care of his disciples. "Do you love me?" he asks. "Then, feed my lambs. Tend my sheep." Jesus commissions his followers to take up the life of a Shepherd. He commands them to ensure the well-being of the flock, to invest their lives in the lives of others.

The First Letter of John, which likely arose from the same community as the Gospel of John, puts it this way: *We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*

He laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for others. This is our charge as followers of Christ — as sheep of his fold, as lambs of his flock, as children the Shepherd has called by name. But, more than that, this is our calling as the church — the Body of Christ. A former archbishop of Canterbury, who implored the church to protect Jews from the Nazis, said it this way: "The church is the only society that doesn't exist for the good of its members."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the church is called to lay down its life so that others might have life ... and have it abundantly.

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On that summer evening in 1993, as flames ripped through the sanctuary of St. James' Episcopal Church, Michael Curry and the congregation he served faced a choice: Would the church abandon West Baltimore? Or would the congregation follow the way of the Good Shepherd?

² Ibid.

“Will the church leave the city?” As the question hung in the air, Michael Curry noticed a neighborhood kid looking at him with fear in his eyes; he was listening for the priest’s response. So Curry turned to the reporter and replied with a clear voice, loud enough for bystanders to hear: “St. James’ is committed to the city. We are not leaving. We will rebuild right here.”

It might have sounded like a spur-of-the-moment decision, offered in haste to comfort frightened onlookers. But, in truth, the decision had been made early in Curry’s tenure, when the people of St. James’ chose to re-commit themselves to the way of love. Over the years, this congregation with a “goodly heritage” had drifted toward existing primarily for the good of its members. When Michael Curry arrived at St. James’, the church had a thriving social life, but many in the community were feeling disconnected from the neighborhood and spiritually adrift.

So the people of St. James’ figured out what they could do to feed Christ’s lambs, to tend Christ’s sheep. One retired kindergarten teacher began reading to children every day after school. That was the humble beginning of St. James’ Academy, which grew to provide academic tutoring and a secure environment for kids. During the summer, the congregation offered a camp and provided breakfast and lunch so that kids who relied on free meals at school wouldn’t go hungry during the warmer months. In the winter, the people of St. James’ left the building and sang Christmas carols on the same street corners where drug-dealers were plying their trade. And, as the congregation walked the streets with flashlights, they became a presence in the neighborhood and found themselves awakened to the needs of their community.

Yes, even before the reporter asked the question, the choice was clear. Because the people of St. James’ had already laid down the life they knew and taken up the life of a Shepherd. They had already committed to the well-being of the flock that Christ had entrusted to their care. And, in doing so, they found new life in serving the Good Shepherd.

“The next two years, during rebuilding, might have been the best years we had at St. James’,” writes Michael Curry. With the sanctuary under construction, the community gathered each week in the parish hall. Gone were the beautiful stained glass windows. Gone were the finely carved pews and stately pulpit. There were no adornments in that hall — just rows of metal chairs and stacks of prayer books. But, every week, those chairs were filled with a community more varied and vibrant than the one that first greeted Curry when he arrived at St. James’. Now, there were children from the neighborhood — not just a few crammed into the front pews, but many scattered throughout the congregation. Some came with their families; others sat with those they’d come to know through the St. James’ Academy or summer camp. These children were invested in that community of faith, because the church had invested its life in the life of the city. The people of St. James’ had laid down the life they knew, and had found new life — abundant life — in the Shepherd’s service.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

This is not a calling restricted to those who live or serve in struggling neighborhoods. It is the call placed upon each of us in baptism, when we are welcomed into the Shepherd’s flock and fold. And we are faithful to it when we, too, lay down our lives and take up the life of a Shepherd. We are faithful to it whenever, however, we find ways to care for his lambs, to protect his sheep. Whether providing green pastures or rescuing those in danger from the rocks, this is our calling – our commission from the risen Christ. So, come, let us lay down our lives. And may we, too, find new life — abundant life — in the Shepherd’s service.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of the Cosmos, the past year has been challenging; it has been frightening; and it has been unsettling. The pandemic has thrust us into a surreal existence, the likes of which we have never experienced. At times it ignites anxiety; other times it fuels heartache. The immense death toll, the isolation from others, the closing of businesses, the obstacles to education, all of these and more have extracted a cost that defies calculation. At times, the pandemic has seemed like an avalanche that engulfs everything in its path.

Eternal God, the past year has also placed on display the ugliness of racism and how it maintains a relentless grip on our nation; our propensity for violence and lack of respect for human life; a willingness to destroy democratic principles; an escalation of individualism at the expense of the common good. Even nature is rebelling with hotter temperatures, massive wildfires, deadly droughts, devastating floods, more frequent hurricanes, and rising ocean levels.

Gracious God, we need to embark on a new path for so many reasons, but who shall we follow? To whose voice shall we listen? If we are to have any chance of thriving – or even surviving – surely, we must faithfully turn to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Plainly, we must turn to one who seeks to lead us to a life infused with love, drenched with joy, and brimming with purpose.

Wise One, remind us that it is Jesus who knows the way to verdant pastures of promise where people seek to live in harmony with one another so that life may flourish.

It is Jesus who knows the way to healing the illnesses that fester in our soul.

It is Jesus who knows the way to calming our fears and lessening our anxiety.

It is Jesus who knows the way to a society imbued with the virtues of compassion, justice, and truth.

It is Jesus who knows the way to the thoughts and the actions that make for peace.

Loving God, may we find the courage and the conviction to follow the Good Shepherd who knows us thoroughly, loves us completely, and calls us to a beautiful life that helps to nudge our world in an inspiring direction.

We join our voices to pray as the Good Shepherd has taught us to pray, saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.